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SUBJECT: SERBIA: LORD, HOW THIS SANDZAK IS GIVEN TO LYING

REF: A) ZAGREB 197; B) BELGRADE 104; C) 07 BELGRADE 1627; D) 07 BELGRADE 1394

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Summary

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11. (SBU) The ethnically-Muslim region of Sandzak remains a tense volatile area, prone to sporadic violence as a result of a feud between two rival Islamic associations. The May 11 parliamentary and local elections in Sandzak provide both an opportunity to vote out a particularly distasteful local leader, Novi Pazar Mayor Sulejman Ugljanin, and an opportunity for the 100,000 ethnic Muslim electorate to vote against a Radical government. During a March 17-18 visit to Serbia's ethnically Muslim Sandzak region, locals told an international U.S., German and OSCE delegation enough variations on the March 7 shooting in Tutin to ensure that the real truth behind the shootings would remain in Sandzakian obscurity, and also that tension, violence and intimidation would remain a way of life at least through the May 11 national and local elections. Local ethnic Muslim "Bosnjak" entrepreneurs, accustomed to being accepted equally by Serbs and Albanians (or at least equally mistrusted by both) in Kosovo, claim cross-border trade has dropped precipitously since Kosovo declared independence on February 17. End Summary.

Zilkic Vantage Point

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12. (SBU) Eyewitnesses, politicians, religious representatives and NGO's can only agree that in the obscure Sandzak municipality of Tutin, on March 7, crowds from both of the two schisms of the Serbian Islamic Community fought over the laying of a corner stone for a new medresa, shots were fired and riot police broke up the group. Requests for details on the cause of the fight, who shot first, why the ceremony was planned for March 7, why Tutin needed a medresa, and even why there is a schism to begin with, evoked a wide-range of emphatic responses and accusations of mendacity thrown at anyone else with a different view. DCM's delegation could only conclude that the intra-Islamic community dispute was far from resolved and would likely serve to inflame passions again in the future. The delegation also concluded that the dispute had nothing to do with religious doctrine and everything to do with politics and

money, and was also being driven by the split between Prime Minister Kostunica and President Tadic.

13. (SBU) The chronology of Serbia's Islamic Community schism has been outlined in reftels. Though Sandzak had been largely violence-free since the November 16, 2007 shooting around Novi Pazar's Central Mosque, the two groups have continued to take potshots at each other and maneuver for position as Serbia's legitimate heir to Islamic land-holdings nationalized after World War II. The urgency of establishing one or the other group as the political successor is all the more acute as Serbia moves to implement a restitution law in October that will return significant real estate to the Islamic Community.

14. (SBU) Upstart Islamic Community Reis-ul-Ulema (Head) Adem Zilkic is supported by Novi Pazar Mayor Sulejman Ugljanin, who is in political alliance with Prime Minister Kostunica. Ugljanin's Democratic Action Party of Sandzak (SDA) General Secretary Nermin Bejtovic told DCM's delegation on March 17 that

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the creation of the new community was necessitated by Serbia's new religious law and that it was intolerable for Serbia's Islamic Community to be subordinate to the Sarajevo Reis (located in another country -- Bosnia-Herzegovina) precisely because of land restitution issues. Serbian land could not be returned to a foreign owner. He blamed Sandzak Grand Mufti Zukorlic for continuing to instigate violent incidents and complained that Sandzak's police and judiciary were failing in their duties to contain Zukorlic. "It's not normal for one group to continuously disrupt the police and for the police to not respond," he said. According to Bejtovic, Zukorlic's "band of 20 bodyguards" were freely roaming the streets of Sandzak, fully armed with unregistered weapons, and the police did nothing to stop them.

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15. (SBU) Bejtovic was backed up by Tutin Mayor Semsudin Kucevic, who met with the delegation in Tutin on March 18. Kucevic also complained bitterly about the incompetence of his local police and judiciary saying that they knew full well that Zukorlic was arming his supporters and trying to exert his control over Tutin, which clearly was Zilkic territory. "Zukorlic has no local support among the Islamic faithful in Tutin, and he knows it." Kucevic claimed Zukorlic instigated the March 7 violence when his people threw rocks at locals trying to block the corner-stone laying. Kucevic added that the medrese issue was not new, that Zilkic's people had clear claim to the medrese construction site as was documented from permits from the Ministries of Religion, Infrastructure and Internal Affairs. (Note: All run by DSS coalition ministers. End Note.).

16. (SBU) More lurid details to Zukorlic's alleged fall from holiness were offered by Zilkic's Chief of Staff Jakub ef. Lekovic and Deputy Mufti Hasib ef. Suljovic, who met with the delegation on March 17. They described themselves and Zilkic's community as the rightful authority for Islam in Serbia, because they had filed all their papers legally, and had a constitution and statute, per the new law on religion. Zukorlic refused to acknowledge this new legal reality which made him disrespectful of local law. Though Suljovic claimed he had been Novi Pazar's Central Mosque's Mufti for 20 years, Zukorlic took over the mosque by force in November, 2007. "Now I can't even get into my own mosque!" Furthermore, Suljovic claimed, when police finished their investigation of the March 7 event in Tutin, they found that Zukorlic had hidden plastic coated steel pipes under

the makeshift stage, as proof Zukorlic's people had planned to beat Zilkic's. Zukorlic had not always been such a bad guy, Suljovic said, but turned political in the mid-nineties and had even tried to start his own political party. Suljovic noted Zukorlic's charm but said he lost the respect of his parishioners when, after getting rid of wife number two, wife number three gave birth to a child less than nine months after a wedding ceremony. Unprompted, Lekovic added that the need to decide on a legitimate authority for Serbia's Islamic Community was acute because of the upcoming implementation of the restitution law and the need to return Islamic lands to the rightful authority.

#### Zukorlic Vantage Point

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17. (SBU) "Liars, thugs, and criminals," Zukorlic thundered when the delegation met with him on March 17. "Ugljanin and his dupe Zilkic are determined to violate our personal and collective rights; this situation is only going to get worse." Also referring to the new law on religions, Zukorlic complained that the law elevated the Serbian Orthodox Church to national church status and relegated Serbia's other religions to second class status. In order to further weaken the Islamic community, Zukorlic said, Kostunica ordered the creation of a parallel Islamic organization, headed by Zilkic. According to Zukorlic, Zilkic earned his title by telling locals at Friday prayer that they were not good Muslims if they didn't vote for Sulejman Ugljanin.

18. (SBU) Zukorlic defended his decision to hold the corner-stone laying ceremony on March 7 saying "it's spring, time to build." He claimed considerable work already had been done on the medrese's foundation and that the corner-stone ceremony should not have been a provocation. He said Zilkic's armed thugs started coming after the ceremony attendees, but left when the riot police showed up, thereby giving the picture that the conflict was solely between Zukorlic's "unarmed" faithful, and fully kitted-out riot police. He claims his driver was shot three times by the police. Zukorlic said he agreed to give up further work on the medrese when he heard that the next day 1000 riot police were scheduled to descend on Tutin and also that Novi Pazar military barracks had been put on alert to deploy to Tutin.

19. (SBU) If surroundings signal any kind of legitimacy, Zukorlic clearly is the best ensconced. His offices occupy a number of buildings on a fenced in compound and his office is

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paneled by hard-carved wood from the famous Bosnian Konjic woodworkers and silk pillows. Zilkic works out of a storefront. Zukorlic has served as Serbia's chief mufti since 1993 when he was appointed by Sarajevo's Reis-ul-Ulema Ceric to whom the ex-Yugoslav Islamic communities still report. During DCM's last visit he gave her a copy of a letter signed by Ceric to President Tadic requesting that Tadic acknowledge Zukorlic as Serbia's Chief Mufti. In response to DCM's question, Zukorlic said Tadic had never responded to Ceric, but that he had quietly lent his support by paying a visit on Zukorlic when he visited Novi Pazar during his election campaign. Tadic had requested no press for the visit. During the delegation's next day visit to Tutin, Mayor Kucevic also cited this "secret" meeting with Tadic, as well as a subsequent meeting with Defense Minister Sutanovic as "proof" Zukorlic had the support of DS and the Serbian military

¶10. (SBU) Many of Sandzak's prominent NGOs/civil society groups have formed a local political action group called "Political Front for Change." Representatives of this group told the delegation on March 17 that the Zilkic-led Islamic Organization was clearly designed by Prime Minister Kostunica to keep the Bosnjak community off balance and to keep Sandzak at a simmer, if only to demonstrate Serbia's political instability. They linked this to Kostunica's Kosovo policy saying the Prime Minister was determined to show the world how Kosovo independence further destabilized the Balkans. Zukorlic was no innocent either, they insisted, and concurred that he had made himself vulnerable by building himself into a locally political figure as important as Ugljanin. A requisite to any stability in Sandzak, they insisted, was getting rid of Ugljanin in the May 11 local elections. The group said it would depend on an international presence during these elections because Ugljanin was sure to try to steal them. He was not above arming his party's poll-standers and physically threatening those who would not vote for his party. He could also be expected to create a significant number of new jobs before the elections, in order to "buy" the votes of new municipal employees and their extended families. In spite of this tremendous pressure, these typically gloom-and-doom activists believed democratic forces had a good chance of voting out Ugljanin. They feared, however, that he would not go peacefully, though they were not sure how he would fight to keep his position.

#### Elections Maneuvering

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¶11. (SBU) In spite of the animosity between the two major Bosnjak parties - Minister of Labor and Social Policy Rasim Ljajic's Sandzak Democratic Party (SDP) and Mayor Ugljanin's Kostunica-backed Democratic Action Party (SDA) - the two went into a brief coalition on the eve of the second round presidential elections to support Tadic. Though Prime Minister Kostunica did not endorse any candidate in the second round, even the SDA could not vote for the Radicals.

¶12. (SBU) SDA's Bejtovic and Kutevic (also a SDA VP) said they were calling on SDP to join a Sandzak Bosnjak "list," and said they might be reluctant to sign an electoral code of conduct if SDP were in coalition with Tadic's Democratic Party. Bejtovic said a joint list could yield six parliamentary delegates (versus the current four held by SDP) and also the possibility of two minister positions.

¶13. (SBU) "Nonsense," SDP delegate Mujo Mukovic, told the delegation during a March 17 meeting, "SDA does not have enough votes to get more than one seat, maybe two; we're much better off sticking with the DS coalition and looking at a bigger pie to divide, if the coalition wins." Mukovic and his SDP colleagues denied any role in the Islamic Community schism, saying although Zilkic clearly had less legitimacy, Zukorlic's increasingly more political role in Sandzak politics had made

him vulnerable. SDP agreed, however, that the feud was cooked by Kostunica in order to keep the Bosnjaks divided. In local

elections, Mukovic said he would not rule out a coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), saying they were eager to cooperate, if it meant an end to Ugljanin's "dictatorship."

¶14. (SBU) Local LDP leaders, accompanied by Belgrade-based LDP Party Presidency member Zoran Ostojic, were not so enthusiastic about a coalition with SDP. "Choosing between Ljajic and Ugljanin," local LDP leader Hajram Djekic told the delegation, "is like choosing between cancer and leukemia." Djekic added that SDP needed LDP more than the reverse, noting that LDP's showing was strongest - sixteen percent - in the Sandzak in the first round of presidential elections in January, and that the percentage steadily was growing.

Trade with Kosovo Dropping

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¶15. (SBU) On March 18, DCM met with local entrepreneurs and recipients of USAID grants for developing small businesses. The group represented a variety of enterprises ranging from computer services to dairy production to jeans manufacturing. After discussing their business plans, the group noted that their trade had dropped significantly by the closure of the administrative line crossing points leading into Albanian-controlled Kosovo. They said they still were able to get goods into Northern Mitrovica through the northern administrative line. The problem with getting goods into Albanian-held territory, they said, was the Serbian administrative border line officials refused to acknowledge any documents, be it business registration licenses or import permits, from the government in Pristina. These Sandzak entrepreneurs said that Bosnjaks had been able to play a middleman role - equally trusted and distrusted - by both Kosovar Albanians and Serbs. In this way they had been able to provide both with much needed goods and services. They said that Northern Mitrovica Serbs and Kosovar Albanians were not suffering so much from this disruption to trade, the former had effectively abolished the northern administrative line and the latter had effectively implemented trade workarounds by going through Montenegro and Macedonia. Those suffering the most, they said, were the Serbs living in the enclaves who had to pay 10 times more the market rate for basic goods, mostly as a result of mark-ups for tycoon/Mafia-backed Serbs beating the trade embargo by establishing a high-priced smuggling network.

¶16. (SBU) Equally, Sandzak Bosnjaks said they were reluctant to reach out to Kosovar Albanians with whom they had had trade relations because of "the message from Sombor." By this they were referring to the boycott of Albanian bakeries by Serbs in the Vojvodina municipality of Sombor (reftel A). From these incidents, Bosnjaks said the signal was clear that anyone doing business with Albanians would pay a price. They said they had sympathy for the Albanian businesses that were affected by this action, saying many had been peacefully living in Vojvodina for generations. They noted that by this apparently government-supported act, Kostunica's government was sending out the clear signal it had no respect for minority rights - just as the government simultaneously was decrying "lack" of minority rights for Serbs in Kosovo.

Comment

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¶17. (SBU) Historically a powder keg, Sandzak remains in a slow

simmer, intentionally heated by Prime Minister Kostunica's ethnic games. Having long ago given up aspirations of unification with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sandzak remains a test case for Serbia's respect for minority rights, an exam Serbia continues to fail dismally. Local and parliamentary elections in Sandzak are likely to be as dirty as anywhere in Serbia, thereby requiring special attention. Potential for outside Islamic influence to grow in Sandzak rises in proportion to the degree that the Serbian central government in Belgrade either

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ignores Bosnjak minority rights or continues to manipulate intra-Bosjak differences. End Comment.  
MUNTER